

A Table in the Wilderness  
Mark 6:30-44  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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As Sally already acknowledged, we heard another version of this story just a few months ago. So, if you feel like you are experiencing *deja'vu*, or if you are wondering where your pastor's creativity went, rest assured this was an intentional choice.

After all, as we've talked about previously, this month we are focusing on table stories as we explore the theme, "From Bread and Cup to Faith and Giving." We are asking questions about how our experiences at the table shape us to live more faithfully and generously in our daily lives.

And what better table story than this to explore that theme?

Also, it is also good for us to look at the various versions of the stories that show up more than once in scripture. This is not an exercise about asking whether the gospel writer Mark, whose version we heard today, is more or less accurate than, for instance, the gospel writer John, whose version with the young boy who shares his lunch is a fan favorite. Rather, when we hear these different versions we are invited to consider what gifts *each* telling has to offer us and we are invited to ask what we can hear anew in each version.

So, today, we heard from Mark. And one of the things that quickly becomes clear in Mark's telling of this story is the compassion of Jesus.

That's where this story begins. The disciples, having gathered together again with Jesus and each other, are busy talking about what they have been doing. After all, just shortly before this, Jesus had commissioned them to share in his work. No longer were they simply the supporting cast cheering *him* on, but he had sent the disciples out in pairs, gifted with the authority to heal and to cast out demons. *They* had gone out to various people and places and had done the same work that Jesus was known for.

So, here they are, having gathered together again, excited to share tales of their successes, but also, exhausted. After all, this work is not for the faint of heart.

Here in Mark, the story of the feeding of the 5,000, which we typically picture with lots of action and busyness, with crowds of people and abundant food...it actually begins with a desire for rest, for escape, for rejuvenation. "[Jesus] said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'" (Mark 6:31, NRSV).

Even as there was plenty of work to do, even as there were plenty of people needing help, Jesus knew the importance of taking time away. He knew this not only for himself, but he saw the need in his disciples and he had compassion toward them.

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But, as we know, compassion wasn't a gift only for his closest friends. Rather Mark tells us that the people who were following them were not to be deterred even when Jesus and the disciples got into a boat and pushed off from the shore. In fact, the crowds of people anticipated where they were going to land and they got there first. They were so desperate for an encounter with Jesus that they were there, waiting, when he stepped ashore.

And, again, hear how Mark describes the scene. He writes, "As [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34, NRSV).

But teaching wasn't the only gift he would give them that day.

Rather, when the day grew late, with the realization that they were a distance from town and that stomachs were rumbling, Jesus saw their physical need and he responded with an abundant meal.

We think of this story as the feeding of the 5,000. But when we look at it as a whole, we might instead call it a story of the compassionate Jesus. Yes, the story ends with lots and lots of people getting fed. But the thread that weaves its way through this entire story isn't food, but instead is compassion.

Whether it is the disciples, needing a break after an exhausting and exhilarating period of work...whether it is the crowds, neglected by the powers that be, searching for someone to see them and care for them...or whether it be the very real physical pangs of hunger that needed tending to...in all of these cases, Jesus' response was compassion. Jesus' response was to meet people in the tired and the hungry and the wilderness moments of their lives, and to see them and to love them.

And, we continue to understand this to be who Jesus is. We continue to claim that this is not a historic position of a figure from the past, but that the living God who is present with us continues to offer this same compassion in the midst of our lives.

I want to invite you now to hear as our friend Jon shares a story of compassion received during a wilderness time in his life. (Play Jon's video)

Friends, the work of meeting people in the midst of their lives - whether that be in places where they need rest, where they need acceptance, where they need love, where they need food - this is not only Jesus' work. As Jon reminded us, it is also our work. It is the work we are called to do together as a community of faith and *for* this world.

The reality is that the compassion of Jesus is often experienced through us. Just think of Jon's witness. He experienced the presence and compassion and acceptance of Jesus as he walked through the mountain. And he also experienced it as his pastor affirmed that no matter what he was a beloved child of God. He continues to experience it in the community here at First Christian Church.

As he said, when we experience compassion, then we too are called to share it.

And, let's not forget, *that's* where our scripture reading started today...with a reminder that the work of Jesus is shared work. Just as his disciples had been sent forth to do his work, so are we. Just as they were partners with him in the feeding of the people who met them on the shore that day, so are we partners with Jesus in responding to the needs of people around us whether at physical tables or in other encounters.

Here in the sanctuary you see all around us signs of our commitment to be partners in Jesus' work. Around us we see fish upon which we wrote gifts we would share. Around us we see ribbons, woven together to remind us that we are not whole without each and every one of us. This last Sunday we added an anchor to our sanctuary wall and we filled it with ideas of ways we could help children know love and justice. Each of these is a reminder that we all have a role to play in the work of God in this world, that we are all called to be a compassionate presence meeting people in all the moments of their lives.

Now here at First Christian, this is the time of year when our Finance Team works on a budget...when our Personnel Team makes sure our staffing is appropriate for our ministry...when our Nominating Committee begins the work of seeking new leaders for various ministries...when our Stewardship Team sends out invitations for you all to be praying about the ways you will support the ministry we share in 2023 with your financial, spiritual, and physical gifts.

And let us be clear that the commitments that are asked of each of us are not about sustaining the organization of the church. Rather, they are about continuing to answer the call to do ministry together, to not only be met by the presence of Jesus, but to meet people in the joy, but also and importantly, in the wilderness of their lives and to share God's love.

Thankfully most of us have experiences, whether at literal or metaphorical tables, of Jesus meeting us not only in joyful times, but in our own wilderness. As we continue to answer our call to be church together, may we continue our commitment to also be that presence for others. May we continue to let the God we meet in bread and cup shape our lives for faithful and generous living. Amen.